

From Domestic to Regional: The Civil War Conundrum and the Cases
of Syria and Algeria

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This paper seeks to answer a simple question: when do regional powers get involved in civil wars? Some civil wars see a significant involvement of regional actors, while others show a remarkable level of isolation. What explains this difference? This research answers this question by looking at two case studies: the Algerian civil war (1991-2002) and the Syrian civil war (2011-up to date). The paper identifies and develops five factors of regional involvement. These are: capabilities, regional dynamics, country's relevance, regional security issues/containment and domestic-external links. Civil wars are today one of the most prominent and deadly forms of conflict, and this paper contributes to understanding the important but understudied issue of regional involvement.

KEYWORD: Regional Security, MENA region, Comparative analysis, Civil Wars.

Introduction

This paper seeks to answer a simple question: when do regional powers get involved in civil wars? Civil wars are today one of the most prominent and deadly forms of conflict: the Rwandan civil war, the civil war in the Balkans as well as the same Syrian civil war are listed among the deadliest conflicts in the aftermath of WWII. The intervention of regional powers frequently leads to increases in the level of violence, the quality and quantity of weapons used and also affects the potential for solutions. Whereas some civil wars see a significant involvement of regional actors, others show a remarkable level of isolation. What explains this difference? Is it a consequence of the specific developments of the civil wars themselves, or is it caused by regional and international factors?

This paper compares two case studies: the Algerian civil war of 1991-2002¹ and the current Syrian civil war. These two cases have been chosen because they present opposite levels of external powers' involvement despite similarities between the countries where the conflict took place. The Algerian civil war shows a striking level of isolation from external interference, while the present Syrian civil war is characterized by a very high degree of external involvement. Despite the presence of a rich literature on civil wars, few studies seek to explain the disparity in the role played by regional powers. The aim of this paper is to assess what drives regional actors' involvement in civil wars. Under which conditions are states more likely to intervene (whether directly or indirectly) in civil wars? This research develops five factors of regional involvement. They are: (i) capabilities, (ii) regional dynamics, (iii) country's relevance, (iv) regional security issues/containment and (v)

¹Scholars disagree on when the civil war terminated since acts of violence connected to the conflict continued up to the mid-2000s.

domestic-external links. These have been elaborated by analysing the development of the Algerian and Syrian civil wars.

This paper will first look at the existing literature on civil wars in order to pinpoint the concepts that are most relevant to this analysis. It will then briefly discuss the main dimension of the analysis: the regional one. The second section of the paper looks at the two case studies: the Algerian civil War 1991-2002 and the current Syrian civil war. The third section introduces five factors of regional involvement and discusses how they apply to case studies. The fourth section elaborates the findings of the comparative analysis. The last section contains some final remarks.

Revisiting external involvement in civil wars

This paper draws on two separate bodies of literature. The first is the literature on civil wars, their development and outcomes; the second is the literature on regional security studies. The literature on civil wars is rich and varied: particularly developed is the subfield dealing with the motives of actors in civil wars. An example of this is *The Logic of Violence in Civil Wars* [CITATION Kal06 \l 1040]. And this study also provides a definition of civil war that will be used in this work:

Armed combat within the boundaries of a recognized sovereign entity between parties subject to a common authority at the outset of the hostilities. [CITATION Kal06 \p 14 \l 1040]

The work of Kalyvas and others have significantly improved our understanding of different aspects of civil wars. Most of these works do not specifically deal with regional involvement in civil wars, but deal with cognate issues and complement the argument of this article. One example is Christia [CITATION Chr12 \n \l 1040], that provides a theory-based explanation

of how (domestic) actors choose or change alliances in civil wars. Particularly developed is the literature on conflict resolution. Among these the work of I William Zartman [CITATION Zar96 \n \t \l 1040] [CITATION Zar02 \n \t \l 1040] deserves particular attention because of its influence on the whole field of civil war studies. Another branch of the literature [CITATION Ste02 \l 1040] deals with the aftermath of peace agreements, and particularly with the implementation phase. Several studies deal with intervention by the international community. An example of this part of the literature is provided by the “Civil wars, insecurity and intervention” edited volume [CITATION Wal99 \l 1040]. The chapters contained provide an interesting insight to the domestic-international relation by using a theoretical approach based on the security dilemma. Yet their contribution to the topic of this study is limited by the fact that the case studies do not focus on the role of regional powers but only on the intervention by the international community.

This study seeks to contribute more specifically to the literature on regional involvement in civil wars. Given how often civil wars become regionalized, and how much this affects the development and potential solution of these conflicts, the shortage of studies dealing specifically with “when and why” regional powers get involved in civil wars is rather surprising. The literature on external involvement in civil wars focuses to a large extent on when external involvement is successful [CITATION Reg96 \t \l 1040] or whether it increases or shortens the length of the conflicts [CITATION Reg02 \t \l 1040]. Regan and Aydin [CITATION Reg06 \n \l 1040] address the relation between kind of intervention and effect on the development of civil wars: they conclude that diplomatic interventions tend to shorten the duration of conflict. This branch of literature gives important insights into the development and potential solution of civil wars, but its contribution to this study is limited as they mainly deal with the consequences of regional involvement rather than its causes. Similarly, Gent [CITATION Gen08 \n \l 1040] shows how intervention on the side of the

regime is under some circumstances less effective than intervention on the side of the rebels. These studies are broadly more concerned with what happens when external actors get involved rather than why and when they do; their contribution to the topic analysed by this study is therefore also limited.

Ethnic conflict has received particular attention in the literature. Akhaha et al. [CITATION Akh08 \n \l 1040] focus on why ethnic conflicts attract external support from states. They focus in particular on whether discrimination of minorities plays a role in increasing external intervention, concluding “*that rebellion elicits external support, and is stimulated by it as well*” [CITATION Akh08 \n \l 1040]. Carment and James [CITATION Car04 \n \l 1040] analyse which kind of states are more likely to get involved in ethnic strives: they conclude that those with low domestic constraints and ethnic uniformity tend to be more belligerent. Whilst the findings of both these works are not incompatible with that of this research, their contribution to cases where ethnic divisions are either not a central factor (like the Algerian case) or are one among many aspects (like Syria) is rather limited.

More relevant to this analysis is Kathman’s work [CITATION Kat10 \n \l 1040]. This research focuses on neighbouring countries’ involvement in civil wars. The author’s main conclusion, that neighbouring states are more directly threatened by the occurrence of a civil war, is in line with the predictions of this study on the risk of spill-over. Aydin [CITATION Ayd12 \n \l 1040] bases her explanation of military intervention on economic liberalism and when analysing civil wars specifically she concludes that states are likely to intervene if they have economic interests at stake (like in other conflicts) but less likely to intervene militarily. Shirkey [CITATION Shi16 \n \l 1040] focuses on how information about the development of a civil war affects leaders’ choices to intervene. His study shows how unexpected events (particularly military ones) increase the likelihood of external intervention. There is no obvious discordancy between Shirkey’s argument and the one of this study- also due to the

fact that the two works deal with rather different topics; despite this the correlation between unexpected military events and involvement does not appear in the Syrian and Algerian cases. Forsberg [CITATION For16 \n \l 1040] analyses civil wars' clustering and contagion. Forsberg's study deals with the opposite relation than the one analysed by this study -- how the development of civil wars influences regions. Forsberg's contribution is therefore rather complementary to the one of this paper.

The second body of literature relevant to this work is that of regional security studies. The emphasis on the regional dimension, and particularly on regional security studies represents one of the main developments in the study of international relations in the last two decades[CITATION Faw09 \l 1040][CITATION Kat05 \l 1040]. Buzan and Waever provide a useful definition of region, which will be adopted in this analysis:

Regions, almost however defined, must be composed of geographically clustered sets of such units - (states) - and these clusters must be embedded in a larger system, which has a structure of its own. [CITATION Buz05 \p 27 \l 1040]

Regions are the main analytical level of RSCT (Regional Security Complex Theory). This theory maintains that security threats are often regional and sub-regional, rather than international or domestic, and the regional dimension is therefore the ideal level on which to analyse them[CITATION Buz05 \l 1040]. Buzan and Waever crucially also divide "macroregions" into smaller sub-regions. Regional actors are the first ones to be affected by the occurrence of a civil war and the ones that have more at stake in the outcome of the conflict. Crucially, regional actors are also the ones that more frequently get involved in the civil wars. This research therefore focuses on the regional dimension of civil wars, and

particularly on regional involvement in civil wars². In this context, the Algerian and Syrian cases also offer some important insights into the interaction between domestic, sub-regional and regional dimensions. It is worth noticing how regional involvement in civil wars can take different forms. It can be indirect (including financing, supporting and training one or more of the parties involved in a conflict) or direct (when external actors intervene militarily in the country where the civil war is taking place)³.

This study adopts a comparative case oriented method and specifically one: “*that uses a case oriented strategy involving cases with different outcomes. The cases may appear very similar and yet experience different outcomes*” [CITATION Rag87 \p 47 \l 1040]. The goal of this comparison is to analyse what aspects explain regional power involvement in civil wars. Five factors of regional involvement are put forward by this study⁴. These five aspects are discussed in section two and developed using the two cases studies in section three. The two case studies are therefore used to “generate theory” on the causes of regional involvement in civil wars. The two case studies (the Algerian Civil war of the 90s and the Syrian Civil War) have been chosen because they present strikingly different levels of regional involvement amid similarities in both the conflicts’ developments and aspects of the two countries’ political systems. The case studies will therefore provide a good indication of the effect of the five factors on regional powers’ involvement.

This study relies on the aforementioned literatures on civil wars and regional security studies. The combination of these two bodies of literature provides the study with a solid theoretical background. The growing literature on regions and regional security studies in particular

²The line between civil war and “interstate war” is often blurred as shown by cases such as the Lebanese Civil war (1975-90) or the Spanish civil war (1936-39).

³Involvement and intervention are in this analysis interchangeable. .

⁴ This analysis does not deal with single state’s foreign policies: it does therefore not discuss why each actor decided to intervene (or not intervene) in the two civil wars. This undoubtedly interesting aspect is beyond the scope of this paper.

provides a critical discussion of some of the key concepts used by this analysis, such as security spill-over or containment. This study uses mostly secondary sources for the two case studies. In the case of Algeria, a broad literature on the civil war exists. This includes a set of works on modern Algeria, such as Ruedy [CITATION Rue05 \n \l 1040], that provided this study with the necessary historical framework. Other works such as Martinez [CITATION Mar05 \n \l 1040] or Roberts [CITATION Rob02 \n \l 1040] offer more specific insights on the origins and development of the civil war in the North African country. In the case of Syria, as the civil war is still taking place, the number of academic works dealing with the topic of this study is relatively low, albeit of good quality. Philipps' [CITATION Phi161 \n \l 1040] is the first study dealing systematically with the international relations of the conflict. This lack of academic sources has led the author to integrate more contemporary sources such as newspapers articles and reports. The inclusion of these sources helped limiting the gaps created by the lack of academic literature on the Syrian case. The study also uses a limited number of primary sources. These are mainly leader's statements reported by newspapers or main media outlets. The author had initially planned to include a wider range of primary sources, but decided against it because of two reasons. The first is the aim of this paper, that seeks to analyse systemic factors that lead to regional involvement rather than the reason that led each single power to intervene. The second is the nature of many leaders' statements on such a sensitive topic. Most of the statements by regional actors emphasise the "humanitarian" motives of involvement in the conflict, downplaying the policy factors that led to their involvement. For this two reasons, only leaders' statements that are non-controversial and have an obvious added value had been included in the study.

The two case studies: civil wars in Algeria and Syria

The two case studies analysed are the Algerian civil war that took place between 1991 and 2002 and the current Syrian civil war (2011-present). These two civil wars, and indeed the countries in which they have occurred, share several important features. The first similarity is in regimes and state structures. Both Syria and Algeria were (at the time of the start of their respective civil wars) military regimes, both with strongly centralized state structures[CITATION Per80 \l 1040]. Secondly, there was a certain degree of ideological affinity between the regimes that ruled the two countries at the beginning of the civil wars. The Algerian FNL can be described as a nationalist movement with Pan-Arab and “leftist” (mainly socialist) elements. The Ba’th power that took over in Damascus in 1963 was (together with its Iraqi counterpart) the clearest political articulation of Pan-Arab ideology⁵. Both regimes were part of that Arab left of the “progressive republics”. From the second half of the 1960s onwards, both regimes adopted measures that antagonized Islamist forces in the country. In the case of Algeria, the 1971 “agrarian revolution” calling for a large nationalization process at the expense of large traditional landowners was perceived as a direct threat against the religious establishment[CITATION Rob02 \p 47 \l 1040]. In the case of Syria, the regime’s Pan-Arab ideology alienated the most religious sectors of society. In the late 1970s discontent with the regime erupted in an open insurrection that threatened to oust the Ba’th party. In both cases Islamist forces represented a significant component of the opposition. In the case of Algeria the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) was the most significant opposition group even before the start of the civil war; in the case of Syria, the protests against the regime did not immediately have an exclusively “religious” connotation, but the role of Islamist forces grew rapidly. Finally, while the events that led to the start of the civil wars were different, some similarities can be found here too. Both countries went through a

⁵ The 1970 “Corrective movement” that followed the takeover of Hafiz Al-Assad imposed a less radical version of Ba’thism, more open towards free market and capital.

peaceful protests-repression-violence cycle, as the next section will note. In the case of Algeria, the regime reacted to the 1988 protests by opening towards a more democratic system, but then retracted when faced with a strong FIS success in the parliamentary election amid fears of an Islamist take over. In Syria the regime never conceded similar openings to the opposition, but in both cases the violent repression appears to have radicalized the opposition forces and pushed the country towards a full-blown conflict.

Despite these similarities, the two civil wars present a striking difference in the level of regional powers' involvement. In the Algerian case, the level of external involvement in the civil war is remarkably low. While the regime accused different countries (particularly Iran, Morocco and Sudan) of supporting the Islamist militants, the main studies on the topic suggest that regional involvement in the civil war was very low⁶. The Syrian case saw the immediate involvement of regional actors, and a constant increase throughout the conflict. Recent works on the conflict confirm that external powers got involved in the conflict very early, and that this involvement significantly shaped the trajectory of the conflict [CITATION Phi161 \l 1040]. What explains this contrast between the two conflicts? Why are we witnessing so much regional involvement in the Syrian case and relatively little in the Algerian one? The next section will provide some historical background to the start of the civil war.

Civil wars in Syria and Algeria

When the Algerian civil war started in late 1991, memories of the country's turbulent path to independence were still relatively fresh. The Front de Liberation Nationale (FLN), the party that led Algeria to independence from Paris, remained firmly in charge in a one party system till the end of the 1980s. Roberts [CITATION Rob02 \n \t \l 1040] shows how the consensus

⁶Prince Sultan Ibn Abzulazziz in a statement published by Al-Sharq Al-Awsat on 26th of March 1991 revealed that his country financed the Islamist movements in Algeria and Tunisia [CITATION Mar05 \p 23 \l 1040]

that had led to the independence of the country was by then largely broken. As the Algerian regime progressively moved to the left under president Boumedienne[CITATION Wil96 \l 1040] and some Islamist forces radicalized, the pact on which the struggle against the French occupiers was based crumbled. In order to address the growing discontent in the country, clearly manifested during the 1988 revolts, President Chadli Bendjedid put forward a comprehensive reform plan[CITATION LeS10 \l 1040]. The opening up led to the first openly contested parliamentary election in December 1991, which resulted in a first-round landslide victory for the main Islamist party, the Front Islamique du Salut (FIS). This party in 1990-91 was :*"The quintessential prototype of the Islamist reformist movement, operating within a non-violent framework and searching to obtain power through democratic means"*[CITATION Ent05 \p 211 \l 1040]. Fearing that the second round of elections would result in a further victory for the Islamists, the Algerian military stepped in, deposed President Benjedid and ended the brief Algerian democratic experience. A five people directory was appointed, the FIS outlawed and the moderates (called the conciliators) within the secular front excluded from power[CITATION Mar05 \l 1040].

The coup d'état further polarized the situation and started a protest-repression-protest cycle that led to a full-blown civil war. The events of the early 90s also created significant division among Islamist forces. Disenchanted with the democratic process and persecuted by the military committee now in power, several supporters of the FIS joined military groups (the main ones being the Armed Islamic Group, or GIA, and the Movement for Islamic State). The extremism and indiscriminate violence against civilians carried out by the GIA in particular led to the creation of groups such as the Islamic Salvation Army (AIS), active in the Western part of the country and loyal to the FIS. Ruedy[CITATION Rue05 \n \t \l 1040] estimates that the peak in the number of fighters was reached in 1996 with a number in the region of 25,000. The Algerian civil war lasted about ten years and caused a number of casualties

estimated to be around 150000[CITATION Rue05 \l 1040]. It resulted in a substantial victory for the Algerian military forces that managed to suppress the Islamist revolt and re-establish their control over the entire country.

Syria's trajectory towards the civil war presents interesting parallels with the one of Algeria. When the wave of protests of the so-called "Arab Spring" hit the region in early 2011, Syria was initially unaffected by the demonstrations. When the protests started in the country, it was the regime's violent reaction that radicalized what was initially a peaceful movement asking for reforms rather than regime change. In fact, during the first months the protests consisted mainly of peaceful demonstrations, with few confirmed cases of opposition violence[CITATION Ali11 \l 1040]. The first military opposition group, the Free Syrian Army, was founded in July 2011 and carried out its first significant military actions in late 2011[CITATION Gua11 \l 1040]. Early 2012 saw the formation and development of several Islamist militias, including the Nusra front (Al-Qaeda's branch in Syria) and Ahrar Al-Sham. By the second half of 2012 the Syrian regime had lost control of large swathes of territory and the clashes of previous months had turned into a full-blown civil war. Despite the frequent suggestions of an imminent regime collapse[CITATION Bla12 \l 1040], the regime was able to absorb significant losses of territory and maintain control of its own core regions. Crucial to the achievement of this goal was (and still is) the support obtained by its regional allies. The Islamic Republic of Iran had a long established partnership with the Ba'ath regime in Syria, dating back to the days of the Iranian Revolution. The Islamic republic rallied behind its ally from the outset of the civil war: as early as February 2012 the foreign minister of Tehran Ali Akbar Salehi when addressing his Syrian counterpart declared that: "Tehran's support for reforms implemented by Damascus is aimed at resolving the on-going unrest in Syria..and it categorically supports the Syrian government against internal and foreign pressures" [CITATION Pre12 \l 1040] Iran and its Lebanese ally Hezbollah proved to be

crucial in strengthening the Assad regime. An Institute for the Study of War report[CITATION Ful13 \l 1040] showed how already in May 2013 the involvement of Iranian troops went further than simple military assistance to their Syrian counterparts⁷. The role of Iranian forces and Iranian trained militias has increased significantly since, together with Hezbollah's involvement[CITATION Sul13 \l 1040]. The opposition on the other hand counted throughout the civil war on the support (mainly indirect) of several regional actors, as well as on the influx of high numbers of foreign fighters from the Arab world and beyond. In November 2011, the Arab League under the lead of Saudi Arabia and Qatar approved sanctions on the Syrian regime. By February 2012 then-foreign minister of Saudi Arabia Prince Saud Al-Faisal was openly calling to supply weapons to Syrian rebels that "needed them to defend themselves" [CITATION Spe12 \l 1040]. Turkey was initially unprepared for the turmoil in the neighbouring country. In August 2011 minister Davutoglu was dispatched to Damascus to broker a negotiation process led by Ankara. Bashar's refusal not only signalled the end of the short-lived rapprochement between the two countries, but was also an unprecedented slap to Erdogan's personal prestige. The relations between the two leaderships suddenly turned sour, with Turkey soon becoming one of the main supporters of the opposition to the Syrian regime. Within a few months from the start of the uprising, virtually all regional states had meddled with the development of the Syrian civil war. Whether by supporting proxy groups in the countries (like the aforementioned states, but also countries such as Jordan), or striking specific targets (such as Israel did) most regional countries intervened (and still intervene) in the Syrian conflict, making it a regional war as much as a civil war.

⁷ The regime was also able to count on an extra-regional ally in Russia.

Factors of regional involvement

This section will introduce five factors of regional involvement based on the cases of the civil wars in Syria and Algeria. The first two aspects, capabilities and regional dynamics, are “external”: they do not depend on developments within the country where the war is taking place. Country’s relevance refers to the country where the civil war is taking place, as it represents the country’s importance within the regional context. Regional security issues is an internal factor, as it refers to the potential threats emerging from the civil war. The final indicator, domestic/external relations, “connects” the domestic and the regional dimensions.

Capabilities

This factor refers to whether regional actors have the resources and means to intervene in the civil war in a significant way. States will need economic, technological and particularly military resources to get involved in a civil war (even more so if the involvement is direct). The kind of resources that a state needs to possess to be able to influence the outcome of a civil war will depend on the nature of the civil war itself, the kind of weapons and technologies being used by warring parties, the geography of the territory where the civil war is taking place. Military capabilities in particular are not an absolute value, but are related to specific situations[CITATION Ran00 \l 1040]. In some cases states simply do not have the military, technological or economic means to get seriously involved in a war taking place in another country. This can provide effective “insulation” from external actors’ involvement.

The economic and military capabilities of main actors in the Levant-Gulf region and Maghreb region at the start of the respective conflicts were different, and so were the geopolitical features of the two civil wars. The main regional actors in the Maghreb had, at the time of the Algerian civil war, relatively low economic and military capabilities. Morocco was involved in a long and costly war with the Western Saharan Polisario Front. Libya’s

involvement in the Chadian civil war had already reduced Qaddafi's capabilities to influence the outcome of another scenario, and the Libyan economy, and particularly its military apparatus, was further crippled by the sanctions imposed from 1992 onwards after the 1988 Lockerbie bombing[CITATION Cor02 \l 1040]. Looking at military expenditures and capabilities, Anthony H Cordesman defined the situation in the Maghreb as "A tragedy of Arms"[CITATION Cor02 \n \l 1040]. The expansion of the armed forces in the region did not really follow a military logic: growing employment in the armies was seen as a way to reduce unemployment and exercise domestic control rather than a way to improve the quality of the armed forces. The situation in the Levant-Gulf region at the beginning of the civil war was rather different. The Levant-Gulf region is home to some big economic and military powers: looking just at some of the main actors, the GDP of Turkey in 2010 was over \$ 700bn and its year GDP growth at about 9 per cent, Iran's was close to \$ 500bn and its GDP growth at per cent, Saudi Arabia's GDP over \$ 500bn and its growth about 4,8 per cent (Morocco at the same time had a total GDP of less than \$ 100bn and a growth of around 3,6 per cent, Libya \$ 75bn and 5 per cent)[CITATION Wor15 \l 1040]. Furthermore, the military capabilities of actors in the Levant/Gulf region are far superior to the ones in the Maghreb by just about every indicator: from military expenditures on the GDP (where Middle East countries rank among the highest spenders in the world) to size of the armies, up to technologies and expertise.

The geographical features of the two civil wars (and of the countries where they took place) were also radically different. Algeria is Africa's largest country with an area of approximately 2,4 mill. Km²[CITATION Col161 \l 1040]. Its territory is covered by large desert areas to its south and the imposing Atlas mountains to its West. This geographical feature effectively "isolated" the country by making more complex for powers such as Morocco or Libya to influence the outcome of the conflict. Syria is a much smaller country, with a size of about 200,000

Km²[CITATION Col161 \l 1040]. Its borders are more “accessible” than the ones of Algeria; furthermore the unstable situation in neighbouring Iraq made it easy to introduce weapons, goods and fighters through the border[CITATION Ara121 \l 1040]. Similarly, Turkey’s border policies played a central role in the external support of domestic opposition.

Regional actors in the Maghreb had lower technological, economic and military resources than actors in the Levant/Gulf. Furthermore the geopolitical conditions in Algeria made it hard for regional actors to influence the development of the civil war, while in Syria they facilitated effective external influence.

Regional dynamics

“Regional dynamics” is the second factor of regional involvement.⁸ This study focuses in particular on the nature of the relation among key regional actors by using the categories of homogeneous and heterogeneous systems developed by Raymond Aron. The French author maintains that ideas and emotions influence state behaviour [CITATION Aro66 \p 99 \n \t \l 1040]. The French author resorts to the idea of heterogeneous and homogeneous systems. This concept is defined as: *‘reciprocal recognition (or lack) of legitimacy among the actors in the system’*[CITATION Aro66 \p 100 \n \t \l 1040]. Homogeneous systems are those in which key actors share the same ideological and political values. In other terms, when a system is homogeneous, states recognize each other’s legitimacy, whilst often remaining rivals⁹. Heterogeneous systems on the other hand are those where key actors do not agree on

⁸This paper does not focus on regional polarity specifically. This does not mean that polarity is not an important factor. Yet polarity is rather more useful when explaining “how” regional powers will get involved rather than why. The case of bipolar and multipolar regions provides a good example. Regional involvement in multipolar systems is more flexible than in bipolar regions: the different poles of power will interact with local actors and favour the creation of a more fluid situation on the ground. While bipolarity will tend to “compact” the warring parties in two fronts, multipolarity will have the opposite effect of creating fragmentation on the ground.

⁹A similar argument is put forward by the ontological threat literature; see for example Mirzen, *Ontological Security in World Politics: State Identity and the Security Dilemma*, European Journal of International Relations (Volume 12, Issue 3, 2006).

the shared norms regulating the system and do not recognise each other's legitimacy as members of the system.

States in heterogeneous systems perceive a civil war as a threat to their position or a chance to improve their position at the expense of their rivals: they will therefore be more likely to get involved by supporting one of the sides. In heterogeneous systems states will project their rivalries on the civil war. Homogeneous systems on the other hand put less pressure than heterogeneous ones on actors to get involved in civil wars. States in homogeneous systems will not perceive the conflict through the lens of competition, and will be more likely to avoid getting involved in the development of the civil war or (when they do) address the developments of the civil war jointly.

While both Syria and Algeria are part of the wider MENA region, they are located in different sub-regions. As Buzan and Waever[CITATION Buz05 \n \l 1040] note, the Maghreb progressively developed its own security dynamics separate from the Levant/Gulf sub-regions. Regional actors always maintained their relations with the wider Arab world, but the security themes and patterns in the Maghreb were by the 80s mostly different from the ones in the rest of the Middle East[CITATION Buz05 \l 1040]. For the purpose of this study we will therefore refer to Maghreb and Levant/Gulf (or Middle East) sub-regions. Algeria is one of the central actors in the Maghreb: this sub-region is also composed of Morocco, Tunisia, Libya and Western Sahara, Morocco and Algeria being the two main regional powers with a long history of tensions and conflict[CITATION Buz05 \l 1040]. In the aftermath of Algerian independence clashes erupted in the contested Tindrouf area. In the 70s it was Algerian support of the Polisario front that caused frictions between the two powers, with Algerian and Moroccan forces clashing in Western Sahara in 1976[CITATION Cor02 \p 60 \l 1040]. Despite its earlier support for the Sahrawian cause, by the 80s Algeria appeared to have accepted Moroccan *de facto* annexation of the region and this acknowledgment allowed for a

significant improvement in Moroccan-Algerian relations. Qaddafi's Libya represents a third potential pole of power. Its aggressive posture had mainly manifested itself with the country's involvement in the Chadian civil war. Libya, sharing a long border with the country, had been a long term ally of the Algerian regime (despite some ups and downs caused mainly by Qaddafi's aggressive posture towards Tunisia). By the late 80s the relations among regional actors had generally improved, as confirmed by the formation of the Arab Maghreb Union (AMU). These developments were closely connected to the rise of the EU's influence in the region. The regional subsystem appeared to progressively transition towards a higher degree of homogeneity. Zoubir maintains that relations between Algeria and Morocco went through a series of ups and downs during the 90s[CITATION Zou05 \l 1040], yet without reaching the levels of conflict of the 60s and 70s. While the regimes that compose it are radically different in terms of structure and ideology, the change in the relations between Algeria and Morocco (the mutual acceptance of the other's role as a legitimate actor within the system) in particular makes the system more homogeneous than other regions. In a homogeneous system such as the Maghreb, regional actors are less likely to compete over the development of a civil war, and therefore not get involved.

The Levant/Gulf system is radically different from the Maghreb in terms regional dynamics. The Levant/Gulf is a multipolar system, where several actors have similar or at least comparable levels of military, economic and cultural power, whilst being significantly superior to any of the other actors. The Levant/Gulf is a region of aspiring and failed hegemonies, one where several actors compete over the regional hierarchy[CITATION Faw13 \t \l 1040]. The region is a heterogeneous system where the key actors are profoundly different and do not share an understanding of the fundamental rules of the system itself[CITATION Aro66 \l 1040]. Regional dynamics are characterized by the presence of rivalries such as the "Gulf Cold war" between Iran on one side and Saudi Arabia

and the Gulf States on the other. In a multipolar heterogeneous region like the Levant/Gulf, the outbreak of a civil war will be perceived by regional actors as a factor of further competition. States will be more likely to get involved in order to pursue their agendas and prevent other regional actors from exploiting the situation.

The Levant/Gulf and Maghreb regions score quite differently on the “heterogeneity/homogeneity” ladder. The Maghreb region progressively became more homogeneous in particular with the improvement of the Algerian-Moroccan relations from the late 70s onwards. The Levant/Gulf region on the other hand remained extremely heterogeneous, a “region of conflict”. The start of a civil war in the Levant/Gulf was therefore perceived through the frame of competition in the Gulf-Levant, with regional actors seeking to exploit the conflict in order to strengthen their position or prevent the regional rivals from doing so. On the other hand, in a more homogeneous region such as the Maghreb this “regional competition” aspect is less significant.

Country's relevance

Country's relevance represents the importance that the country has in regional politics. This could be described as “geopolitical relevance”: a country's centrality in the region, its control or access to strategic areas (such as a strait or a mountain) or important resources. Regional actors will normally be more inclined to try to influence the outcome of a civil war (whether by supporting one of the parties, trying to end the conflict or simply to limit it) if this country is “strategic” or has significant resources. This factor also includes a country's symbolic value. This concept is rather harder to define: it refers to the idea that some countries or territories will have a relevance or prestige not ascribable to tangible assets such as resources. This could be because the country is an integral part of the alliances system in the region, or it derives from aspects such as historical relevance or presence of religious or cultural sites. The introduction of country's relevance might seem to be redundant, for the fact that regional

actors are more likely to get involved in a civil war taking place in an “important” country rather than in a peripheral one might seem obvious. Yet it is important to keep in mind that involvement in civil wars - even indirectly - has its cost. The most obvious aspect of this is the money and resource cost that a state has to invest in order to support a warring party. But involvement in a civil war also has political costs: states invest “diplomatic capital” in support of one of the factions and also expose themselves to the risk of retaliation or even escalation of the conflict. States therefore will get involved in a civil war in a significant way only when they reckon that the potential costs and risks of it are worth taking.

Syria and Algeria are important countries in their sub-regions and regions, but for different reasons. Algeria is a relevant country from the geopolitical point of view, and particularly important for its resources. It is the 6th largest gas-exporter in the world and is currently estimated to have the 10th largest reserves in the world[CITATION CIA15 \l 1040]. It also ranks 16th in the world in oil resources. Syria by contrast is far less resource rich: its crude reserves are less than one fifth of Algeria’s, its natural gas reserves are less than 350 billion to Algeria’s 4, 5 trillion cubic meters[CITATION CIA15 \l 1040]. Yet if we look at the wider region, in the highly symbolic realm of Arab politics[CITATION Bar98 \l 1040], Algeria is rather peripheral if compared to Syria and the Levant. The “religious” centres of the region are located in the Gulf (Mecca and Medina) or the Levant (Jerusalem), the great historical cities of the Arab world in the Levant (Damascus, Baghdad, Jerusalem itself) or in Egypt (Cairo)¹⁰. The centrality of the Arab-Israeli conflict in Arab and Middle Eastern politics has further increased Syria’s relevance: not only is the country a “border state”, but it was also perceived as the main obstacle to Israel’s dominance since the aftermath of the Camp David Accords between the Jewish state and Egypt in 1979. Syria, the “beating heart of the Arab nation”, has been a central actor in inter-Arab politics. Furthermore, Syria was (and is) a key

¹⁰ This symbolic relevance is even more central if the concept of external involvement is stretched to include the flow of individuals and small groups.

member of the so called “Axis of resistance”, closely aligned to Iran and Hezbollah. Within the framework of the “Gulf Cold War” between Iran and the Gulf states, Syria represented an asset to the pro-Iranian alliance. The start of the uprising in Syria was therefore perceived as an opportunity by the Gulf countries, and as a threat by Iran and its allies. Unsurprisingly, both sides got involved in the conflict very quickly.

Despite Algeria’s wealth of resources, Syria is undoubtedly a more relevant country from a strategic and symbolic point of view. This is due to its geographic and strategic centrality, its relevance within the regional alliances framework but also its symbolic value. This centrality contributes to explaining regional involvement in the Syrian case.

Security Issues and Containment

Regional security issues and containment refers to whether the civil war causes threats that regional actors expect to spill over beyond the national borders. When the risk of spill-over is low, regional actors are more likely to ignore it rather than get involved. Regional security threats can be of varying natures, ranging from a danger to vital regional resources to the rise of a rebel group that could threaten/target neighbouring states, up to the threat of state collapse and fragmentation that could alter the stability of the state system. As outlined before, security issues are mostly regional concerns: *“insecurity is often associated with proximity.. security interdependence is markedly more intense between the states inside such complexes than between states inside the complex and those outside it”* [CITATION Buz05 \p 46 \l 1040] Regional involvement will depend greatly on whether regional actors expect the security threats to remain contained within the country where the civil war is taking place or to affect other regional actors.

The threats to regional security and stability arising from the Algerian and Syrian civil war were different in nature and scale. The presence of irredentist groups in different countries

represents a potential threat as these groups could take advantage of the civil war to put forward their claims. Algeria has a significant Berber population like neighbouring Morocco. The presence of minority groups with potential secessionist aspirations represents a typical trans-national security issue. But, as Roberts outlines, the Berber population was not a key factor in the civil war as the Islamists essentially failed to gain support from minorities, particularly from the Berber population. As Roberts shows, the Berbers either remained indifferent to the revolt, or in the case of the Kabylia region, opposed it altogether [CITATION Rob02 \p 129 \n \l 1040].

While the Berber population had regularly voiced its concerns with its treatment (including the 1980 “Berber Spring” protests), these protests remained separate from the Islamist protests and at no stage did the Berbers appear willing to exploit the crisis in the country to push a separatist agenda¹¹. On the other hand in the Syrian case, the presence of a Kurdish population represented a threat to some regional actors from the early phases of the conflict. Syria’s Kurdish population (between 7 and 10 per cent of the whole population according to most estimates) has historical and political links with the bigger Kurdish population in neighbouring Iraq and particularly Turkey. Turkey’s concern with the Kurdish issue is confirmed by the early references to this problem: then foreign minister Davutoglu in October 2011 already intimated Syria to “not even think to incite Turkey’s Kurds”[CITATION Den11 \l 1040]. Due to its effective military forces, the YPG has been able to carve a large Syrian enclave in the north of the country. Kurdish militias have also proved to be the most effective militias in the fight against Islamist groups, and have therefore been working closely with the American-led Western coalition. The growing Kurdish control has alarmed the authorities in Turkey: Ankara’s intervention in July 2015 has

¹¹ Laemont in “Islam and the politics of resistance in Algeria” show how the Berber community had already felt threatened by the Arabization process put into practice in the 80s by the Algerian regime under pressure from Islamist forces.

been framed within the fight against ISIS rhetoric, but has so far targeted mainly Kurdish forces.

The presence of groups or militias with a regional agenda can also represent a threat to regional actors. The Islamist forces in Algeria and Syria were quite different. The relative isolation of Algerian Islamists played a role in limiting the potential spread of security threats. Roberts'[CITATION Rob02 \n \t \l 1040] study shows how the Algerian Islamist movement that was involved in the civil war developed essentially as a reaction to the country's *Revolution Socialiste* of the Boumedienne regime. The movement was from the outset more domestic-focused than other Islamist forces that developed in other parts of the Arab world. Algerian Islamists' main target was therefore taking over (initially by democratic and later by military means) the state rather than "global Jihad". This made them naturally less threatening to other regional regimes. The Syrian case is rather less straightforward. Regional actors favoured the growth of Islamist militias in the hope that they would contribute to the ousting of President Bashar Al-Assad. The role of Islamist forces soon became very important, but initially their goals were domestic rather than regional and international. This rapidly changed with the establishment and development of jihadi groups. Yet it was only with the expansion of the Islamic state in Syria and Iraq that states in the region and beyond perceived the threat to the regional system stemming from the Syrian conflict.

In the case of Algeria, the nature of the opposition to the regime together with the lack of minority "break-up" risk made the civil war less threatening to regional actors. In the Syrian case on the other hand the threat of state collapse (based partially on the involvement of irredentist minority groups in the conflict) represented a driver for regional involvement. The presence of "transnational" insurgency groups in the Syrian case (together with the frailty of some of the neighbouring countries) suggested that the conflict was harder to contain within

the borders of the country. It is nonetheless important to remember how regional powers contributed (inadvertently or not) to the creation of an “international jihadi opposition”.

Domestic-external links

The presence of strong links between external and domestic actors is an important factor in regional involvement in civil wars. Domestic-external links refer to networks between domestic actors and external parties - whether states or other non-state actors. This can range from formal alliances between the regime and regional states to ideological or religious affiliations between domestic groups and external actors. Domestic actors will be able to exploit links to obtain support from their regional allies. Regional actors will be more prone to intervene in the civil war in order to support or protect their domestic allies when these links exist. This could be because they perceive that their defeat will result in a loss of position for them, or because there will be pressure from domestic actors towards supporting the party involved in the civil war. Therefore, when domestic-external links exist and are significant, regional involvement in civil wars is more likely to happen.

The domestic-external links in the Syrian and Algerian cases were radically different. Firstly, there are significant differences in the relation between the opposition forces and outside forces in the two cases. As outlined in the previous section, in the Algerian case the opposition force were rather insulated from external influence. The return of fighters from Afghanistan contributed to a radicalization the Algerian movement, but despite this the Algerian Islamist forces remained remarkably disconnected from other similar movements in the region. Willis shows how the Islamists groupings in Algeria received less founding and supporting from outside sources than their counterparts in Egypt or Tunisia, and even the Muslim Brotherhood had less connections with its sister groups in other Arab countries[CITATION Wil96 \p 94 \l 1040].

The Iranian revolution undoubtedly influenced the development of the Islamist forces that were later to face the regime in the country's civil war, as it did in the case of several other Islamist movements. The success of an Islamist movement able to overturn what was considered the most stable pro-Western regime in the MENA region clearly inspired the Islamist forces in Algeria[CITATION Wil96 \l 1040]. Yet despite President Chadli's direct reference to the role of Ayatollah Khomeini in the aftermath of the 1982 unrest, there appears to be little or no sign of direct links between Algerian Islamist and the Iranian leadership at this stage[CITATION Wil96 \p 91 \l 1040]. The isolation of the Algerian Islamists appears to be an exception within the Arab world. In the case of Syria, opposition forces clearly appeared to have more developed links to external powers. Hokayem[CITATION Hok13 \n \l 1040] points out that the traditional opposition, the one that had longer established networks with external powers, was initially surprised by the start of the uprising and did not play a central role. The uprising started mainly at grassroots level by local activists that had little or no connection with external powers. The traditional opposition, whether Islamist (such as the by and large exiled Muslim Brotherhood leadership) or secular (both inside and outside the country), struggled to gain control over the revolt. The Syrian National Council and later the National Coalition can be seen as an attempt to channel the domestic uprising in a precise political direction. The leadership of these coalitions also had long established networks with regional actors, networks that were used to gather support from them[CITATION Hok13 \l 1040].

The regional relations of the two regimes also played an important role. As outlined before, the Syrian regime is a central member of the "Axis of Resistance" that opposes American and Israeli influence in the region. Iran and Syria have one of the longest established alliances in the region[CITATION Goo13 \l 1040]. This close relation led to an early involvement of Iran and its allies (and particularly Hezbollah) in favour of the Syrian regime. The central

position of Syria in the regional web of alliances undoubtedly increased regional involvement in the civil war. The Algerian regime had been since independence an important player in regional politics: Algeria joined the Arab League in 1962 and had the main “Arab Progressive Republic” in the Maghreb. With the decline of Pan-Arabism from 1973 onwards, the links among these countries loosened. As Akacem[CITATION Aka05 \n \t \l 1040] outlines, Algeria had developed an important role within the Non-Aligned movement and the Organization of African Unity, developing close relations with states outside the Maghreb region. While the Algerian regime had, at the beginning of the civil war, close links with several regional actors, it could not enjoy the same close relations that its Syrian counterpart did.

In the case of Syria, both regime and opposition had longer established relations with external actors than in the Algerian one. These relations played a central role in the different degrees of external involvement in the two civil wars. The links existing between the Syrian regime and Iran and Hezbollah were particularly strong, and proved to be crucial in guaranteeing much needed support for the embittered regime.

Explaining regional involvement

Why do regional powers get involved in civil wars? The comparative analysis of the Algerian and Syrian civil wars carried out in the previous section clarifies several aspects of this complex phenomenon.

Table 1

The factors elaborated all contributed to regional involvement in civil wars, although in different ways. The first aspect, regional capabilities, can be conceptualized as a precondition for regional involvement. When regional actors do not have the economic, technological and military capabilities to influence the outcome of a civil war, their involvement is not possible (or not significant). Looking at the two case studies, regional actors in the Levant/Gulf have comparatively higher capabilities than states in the Maghreb during the Algerian civil war. Furthermore the geopolitical differences between the two countries where the conflict took place made it easier for regional actors to influence the Syrian civil war than the Algerian one. Yet actors in the Maghreb region would have undoubtedly had the capacity to influence the conflict more than they did. Regional capabilities therefore explain lack of regional involvement (when they are very low), but on their own do not explain why and when regional actors do get involved in a civil war.

The other factors analysed concur to explain why and when regional actors will get involved. The effects of regional dynamics on regional involvement are clear when we look at the Syrian and Algerian cases. The start of a civil war in the Levant/Gulf region was seen by the key actors as a factor of further competition: regional states projected their regional agendas

on the Syrian arena. On the other hand in the more homogeneous Maghreb region the civil war was considered more of a domestic issue. Furthermore, Syria and Algeria had different relevance in their respective sub-regions and in the broader MENA region. It is interesting to notice how here symbolic relevance appears to be more influential than the presence of resources. While Algeria is much richer than Syria in terms of material resources, the Levant country appears to have a much bigger specific weight in less tangible aspects. Syria has a central role in the regional web of alliances, being a central member of the so called “Axis of Resistance” and closely aligned to regional powerhouse Iran. Furthermore, the symbolic relevance of the “beating heart of the Arab nation”, a front line state in the struggle against Israel, pushed regional actors to get involved in the Syrian civil war. A regime change in Syria threatened to alter the regional balance more than one in Algeria would have done, prompting key regional actors to intervene in order to influence the outcome of the civil war.

The risk of security spill-over within the region is also an effective factor of involvement. In the case of Syria, the first threat to the stability of the system came from the role of separatist groups, and particularly the Kurdish YPG. The emergence of “radical” groups that could represent a threat to regional actors represents another potential security threat emerging from a civil war, but in this case the score is less clear. It is evident from the existing literature that the Islamist forces fighting in Algeria were more domestically-oriented and had more of a national agenda, while the Islamist forces fighting in Syria have a more “global Jihadi” ideology. Yet this is also a result of the role of regional actors that favoured the flow of foreign Jihadis in the hope of using them to topple the Syrian regime, a strategy that eventually resulted in the emergence of forces that represented a regional threat. Finally, the presence of more robust domestic/external links in the Syrian than in the Algerian case led to more regional involvement. In this case the sectarian aspect appears to have played a particularly relevant role. The regime had strong and long established connections with

regional state and non-state actors, such as Iran and Hezbollah: these actors played an important role in supporting regime forces throughout the civil war. At the start of the Syrian civil war, the “traditional” opposition appeared to be surprised by the sudden development of events, but it gained a higher degree of centrality as the conflict continued. This opposition had strong links to external actors, links that were used to obtain support from external actors. In the case of Algeria, the regime had, comparatively, weaker links to external actors. While the Algerian regime had been a member of the Steadfastness front that had opposed Egypt’s reconciliation with Israel, it could not boast as close links to key regional actors as its Syrian counterpart. The opposition showed a level of isolation from other movements that appeared to be rather exceptional in the Arab world.

Conclusion

This article has analysed the central yet under-researched issue of regional involvement in civil wars. Most of the existing literature on civil wars maintains that regional involvement affects the development and potential solutions of civil wars. Despite this near consensus on the importance of regional involvement, the topic is rather unexplored in the literature. This study addresses this gap by carrying out a comparative analysis of the Algerian civil war (1991-2002) and the current Syrian civil war. Based on this comparative analysis, it developed five factors of regional involvement: capabilities, regional structure and dynamics, country’s relevance, regional security issues/containment and domestic-external links. These factors proved to be effective in explaining the different degree of involvement of regional actors in the Algerian and Syrian civil wars. They do nonetheless have “different” effects on the potential for regional involvement. Military capabilities are a pre-condition for regional involvement, for in the cases when states do not have sufficient resources they will not get

involved civil wars. The other aspects analysed all contribute to regional involvement in civil wars, showing that this phenomenon is a result of both the specific patterns of development of the conflict within the country and of regional features.

The main contribution of this research is adding to the literature on the relation between civil wars and regional security. This paper offered a more systemic view of the phenomenon of region involvement in civil wars: several studies on the topic focus on rather narrow typologies of civil wars (such as ethnic conflict). The use of a comparative and qualitative method and only two case studies allowed to focus in depth on some specific features of regional involvement. This study showed that there is undoubtedly great potential for further research in this area. A topic so central yet understudied as the one analysed by this research would also benefit from analysis carried out using different research methods and techniques. A broader comparative analysis, looking at a bigger set of case studies, would complement the research carried out by this paper. The inclusion of FPA level analysis appears to be an important step for further research. States' specific goals are undoubtedly central in understanding regional involvement in civil wars. The relation between global and regional dimensions and how it contributes to explaining regional involvement in civil wars is another related area with great potential for future research. Finally, the involvement of non-state actors represents a separate (yet related) topic that could be analysed by a further research paper. The flow of groups and individual fighters has differed significantly in some of the recent civil wars (including the two case studies analysed here), and the reasons for this are largely unexplored.

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Table 1

	Capabilities	System	Country	Security	Dom./external
			Relevance	"Spread"	Links
Syria	High	Heterogeneous	High	High	Strong
Algeria	Medium	Homogeneous	Medium	Low	Weak